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9.1 Plenary: ELT in difficult circumstances: challenges, possibilities and future directions

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Introduction

In 2006, I was a recipient of a Hornby Trust scholarship to study for an MA in Teaching English to Young Learners at the University of Warwick, UK. Prior to that, I had worked for ten years in various roles including as a teacher, teacher trainer and national pedagogic inspector for bilingual education in the Ministry of Basic Education in my home country, Cameroon. During my MA studies, I had the privilege to study in very well-resourced classrooms with the guidance of tutors who used various interactive strategies to help students engage with the subject of each lesson. More importantly, I was exposed to a wide range of theoretical constructs, research perspectives and practical ideas for good practice in ELT, many of which were very new to me but some of which resonated with my own previous professional experiences. Very often, I wondered how relevant the ideas developed in the different modules of the MA programme would be to my context, given the inherent difficulties my colleagues and I were familiar with in my country. Even the ‘difficult circumstances’ described in some of the literature I was introduced to (e.g. Maley 2001; West 1960) were somewhat different from the circumstances I was familiar with in my context. The MA programme exposed students to a wide range of ideas but it was incumbent on us, international students, to take these ideas back and adapt them to the realities of our working environments. This, unfortunately proved to be difficult when I returned to my country at the end of my MA studies; two years of sustained engagement with my colleagues in their classrooms and through formal and informal teacher training and development workshops proved to me that there was more value in returning to the basics and developing pedagogical ideas that were legitimate to the context, rather than in adapting newly learned ideas to the context. However, my exposure to different research perspectives and procedures at Warwick had, I think, sufficiently armed me to be able to revisit my own approach to teacher training and pedagogic supervision; this, together with my involvement over several years with colleagues within the Cameroon English Language and Literature Teachers’ Association (CAMELTA), was vital in helping me adjust to the context of my work. This paper tells the

story of my earlier experiences as a teacher and how these experiences informed my subsequent experience as a researcher and, in turn, the development of ideas for collective research within my community of practice, CAMELTA. I conclude with some reflections on future teacher development and research directions that might enhance language teaching and learning in such contexts.

Difficult circumstances: whose circumstances?

Michael West first used the expression 'difficult circumstances' in 1960 to refer to English language classrooms

consisting of over 30 pupils (more usually 40 or even 50), congested on benches (not sitting at individual or dual desks), accommodated in an unsuitably shaped room, ill-graded, with a teacher who perhaps does not speak English very well or very fluently, working in a hot climate (West 1960: 1).

Maley (2001) extends this definition, describing a classroom of 60 secondary school students who have had to walk a distance of at least five miles after doing their morning chores, crammed in a dirty classroom meant for 30; a poorly paid teacher with a rudimentary competence in English language using a textbook that represents characters from an unfamiliar luxurious culture in a classroom with a pitted and grey blackboard and no chalk at times, and temperatures of 40 degrees Celsius. While the classroom conditions described here might have constituted 'difficult circumstances' for an English native teacher from a relatively temperate climate and experience of smaller resourced classrooms, it might not be the same for teachers born and raised in contexts like India and the Middle East (where Michael West worked) or in sub-Saharan Africa and other developing countries around the world.

What do I mean by 'difficult circumstances'?

It may be asked what is meant by 'difficult circumstances' and who decides what is 'difficult'. Given the emerging realities of English language teaching and learning contexts around the world today, would it be fair to say the definitions given by West (1960) and Maley (2001) need to be expanded? The emergence of English as a global language is having considerable impact on policies and practices (Nunan 2003) around the world. The English language has fast become the language of the world; many countries, eager to train citizens to be competitive in the global market, are including English language in school curricula (Graddol 2006). In many developing countries English is both a subject in the curriculum and

a medium of instruction; the lowering age for exposure to English instruction (Cameron 2003) means that more and more children are experiencing formal education in a language other than their home language and in learning environments that may not meet the minimum conditions for effective language learning. Vast migrations have also imposed challenges for teachers in western contexts that hitherto might not have been considered in the mainstream literature on ELT developed mainly in the West.

My own experience of working with young learners and their teachers both in Europe and in parts of sub-Saharan Africa has exposed me to the specific sets of issues that teachers have to deal with in their day-to-day practices in these contexts. Teachers are indeed confronted with various types of difficulties in their daily work lives, and this makes a definition of ‘difficulty’ very elusive. What is more, the circumstances which one teacher considers favourable might actually constitute a difficulty for another teacher. In terms of teaching and learning, therefore, it may be more convenient to define difficult circumstances as those circumstances that are outside the control of teachers and learners but which affect their daily experiences of teaching and learning significantly.

Cameroon: my working context

Since the dawn of the new millennium, the number of pupils learning English around the world has grown exponentially, especially in developing countries where the movement for Education for All has led to increased enrolments at primary level without a concomitant increase in resources. In sub-Saharan Africa, studies (e.g. Ampiah 2008; CONAP 2008; Goza *et al.* 2008; Komba and Nkumbi 2008; Muthwii 2001; Nakabugo 2008; O’Sullivan 2006; Sawamura and Sifuna 2008; Tembe 2006) have revealed that the implementation of the Education for All policy through the provision of free primary education has further exacerbated existing challenges to policy implementation like overcrowded and multigrade classrooms; lack of textbooks; lack of libraries; low teacher proficiency, qualification and motivation; students’ limited exposure to English language usage; lack of financial and material resources; and other cultural constraints. Despite these, there have been continuous demands for quality teaching (UNESCO 2005) and teacher training (Akyeampong *et al.* 2013), the result of which has been the promotion in ELT circles of different forms of communicative language teaching.

My early experiences of teaching were in Cameroon, a country with 258 languages and tribes, where French and English are the media of instruction. In addition to the challenges listed above, the Cameroonian language classroom typically consists of students

from multiple L1 backgrounds and, in a large part of the country, children from francophone homes studying in the medium of English. Students are expected to sit six summative assessments in the course of each year of primary and secondary schooling in addition to high-stakes exams at the end of each cycle of education. At the macro level, initiatives from the Ministry, mainly funded by interested third parties, have meant that teachers are constantly required to change their methodology; in fact since 1999 there have been 12 different pedagogic innovations requiring teachers to undergo new training. What is more, approaches to in-service teacher training have been based on a deficit paradigm (Rubdy 2008) which, as Wallace (1999: 17) puts it, works on the assumption that training is meant to ‘remedy some deficiency in participants’ professional knowledge, practice or whatever’. Such pressure for innovation and the absence of any recognition or no acknowledgement of the effort teachers put into the circumstances within which they work puts them under severe danger of burnout. As Allwright (2003) argues, it seems likely that even excellent teachers placed under pressure to ‘enhance’ their teaching with ever changing pedagogical ideas and consequently battered by the endless demand by ministry officials for novelty may come under severe risk of ‘burn-out’, of becoming ‘cosmetically tired’ of the job they are doing so well.

My experiences: working with teenagers

My experiences of working as an inspector and also as an active member of CAMELTA have brought me in contact with some excellent teachers who have resorted to their own pragmatic responses to the circumstances of their workplace. My own early experiences of teaching English to teenage students in a French-medium secondary school in the north of Cameroon taught me that for many young people, English could be a life-giving language and as a result, it was important for me to focus on the aspirations of learners, rather than on the challenges imposed by policy and context. Teaching a class of 235 students in a classroom meant for 60 students and with fewer than 20 textbooks and temperatures of up to 46 degrees Celsius, I quickly found out that adopting traditional approaches to teaching would not help my students. Following a process of negotiation with my students (see Kuchah and Smith 2011 for details) we were able to develop what I may call a ‘pedagogy of partnership’ that significantly enhanced their learning experience.

This form of pedagogy entailed involving students in the sourcing and selection of teaching materials from the local environment as well as involving them as partners in the teaching process. Working in groups under the trees outside the classroom, my students

engaged in a variety of activities around materials (including stories, poems, magazines and newspaper items, adverts, slogans, health brochures, audio recordings of radio news, transcripts of interviews conducted with local English speaking people and so on) which had been identified and selected by them. Through this, they were able to produce their own materials for subsequent use in language learning. My responsibilities were to ensure that the content of the materials selected by students was relevant to the curriculum needs, to help in developing a set of specific activities that each group had to carry out within a given time frame, to provide enough copies of each set of materials to students and to moderate group and classroom discussions.

One such resource provided by a student was an excerpt of Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous speech, 'I have a dream', which we used to generate classroom discussions about the problem within American society that King was addressing, as well as what students considered key problems within Cameroonian society. This led to a decision for each group of students to write a 'dream' poem about one of the problems arising from the discussions.

Below are two examples of students' (unedited) poems:

TRIBALISM

I have a dream that one day
Tribalism will be kick out of Cameroon
And soon Gadamayos and Wadjos
Will live together and think together
About the future of their nation.

I have a dream that one day
Bamilekes and Mundangs
Will eat Nkwui and Nyebe together.

I have a dream that one day
Cameroon will be a big village
Where every son and daughter
Will feel good every where
This will be a day of glory.

GENDER DISCRIMINATION

I have a dream that one day,
Boys and girls of Maroua, Garoua
Boys and girls of Cameroon, of the whole nation
While be able to stay together in a classroom for the society.
That one day, girls will drive taxi moto

And boys while sit behing
That women while marry men
I dream of a world where women
While take care of their husbands and
Husbands take care of their wives
Where they while live in equals rights and privileges.
And when this dream shall come true
I have the faith that one day,
Walai! Men and women joined together
While move this country into a great nation.

My experiences: working with younger learners

I also had the opportunity to develop this form of partnership with younger learners (11 year olds) in a state English-medium school in the capital of Cameroon. Classroom realities here were the same as those in my earlier experiences described above; many of these children came from homes where French was the medium of interaction with peers, classes were large, parents could not afford textbooks for their children and the only materials available to teachers were the blackboard and chalk. To make up for the lack of materials, I looked for materials myself but used these as stimuli for student-generated materials. In one of my lessons, for example, I copied out from Christine Nuttall's book (1996) the first paragraph of a short story entitled *A Son to Be Proud of* on the blackboard and encouraged students, working in groups, to complete the story. Each group appointed a secretary who read their text aloud to the class and, with the help of further questions and suggestions from the class, developed their stories further. The final versions of their stories were then compared and contrasted with the original story, generating further discussions and reflections on both the content and language of their own texts. Students were also encouraged to draw pictures in response to the original story and to explain their pictures to the rest of the class. The next step was to take some of the pictures students in one class had drawn in response to the original text into another class; the second class then wrote original texts based on the pictures. Figure 9.1.1 shows a picture of a hospital scene inspired by Nuttall's story and an excerpt from a factual text written by another student in response to the picture.

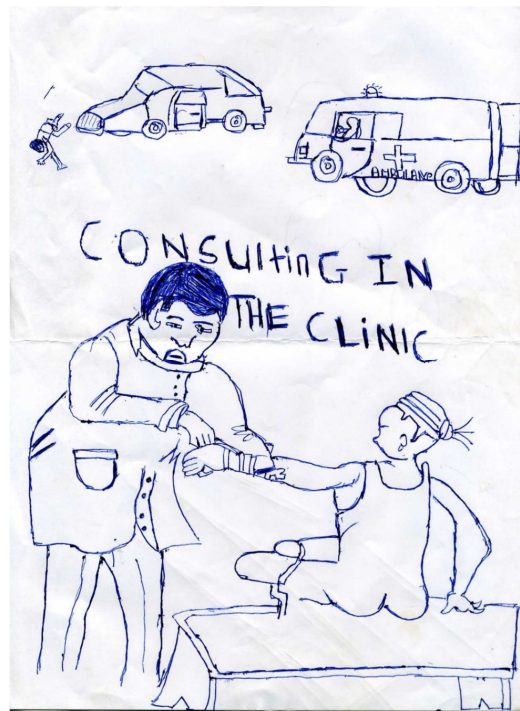


Figure 9.1.1: *Student illustration based on a story*

The importance of a hospital

The most important think in our life is to have in good health. When you are sicking, you must go to hospital. In hospital, a doctor can look at your blood and your eyes and your mouth and he can discover the coss that is making you to be sick. When he discover he will precraib some tablets or injections which can make you to become well again. It is very good to go and consult in the hospital when you are sick. Many people taking medcine at home or buy from the road which is dangeros and can killing them ...

Every people must go to hospital because hospital is very importance ...

Overall, students' texts displayed a complexity of language use but also important problems of syntax which served as a diagnostic tool for 'accuracy therapy'. In other words, it was possible for me to tailor grammar- and vocabulary-based lessons to the immediate needs of students as identified from their own writing. I learned from this experience that using student-generated materials brings authenticity to the learning experience, provides opportunity for more learner–learner collaboration, enhances negotiation of meaning, motivates young learners and develops as well as takes into account learner agency. More

importantly, we were able to generate a range of materials which teachers in this school could draw upon to teach English in various classes of the school.

The practical experiences of dealing with the specific circumstances of my teaching context taught me that learners are partners, that they have a variety of talents and that they could be relied upon as resources and resource providers for the language classroom. I also learned that encouraging students to seek answers to basic questions about learning (e.g. Who am I? What do I want to achieve? How do I achieve what I want to achieve? What are the challenges involved? How do I overcome these challenges? How much support do I need?) was key to developing learning to learn and learner autonomy which could lead to a pedagogy of partnership.

From practice to research

My approach to research in the kind of context I describe here has been largely influenced by my own experiences. When I had the opportunity to follow up formally, through my recently completed doctoral research, what I had begun to learn in practice, my concern was not to replicate or promote my practice but to gain further insights into the practices of other teachers working in my kind of context. As an active member of CAMELTA, I had had the privilege to interact with teachers who were doing creative things in their classrooms and whose pedagogic practices, though inconsistent with policy requirements, were enriching to the learning experiences of their students. Unfortunately because such practices are not often shared in the public domain, they tend to go unnoticed. My study therefore sought to investigate the practices and perspectives of young learners and their teachers in order to find features of what constituted good (for YLs) and appropriate (for teachers) ELT practice in English-medium primary schools in two distinct two contexts in Cameroon. My research focus was also guided by arguments in the literature (e.g. Holliday 1994a, 1994b; Bax 2003; Kumaravadivelu 2001; Rubdy 2008) that appropriate approaches to ELT should emerge from the local teaching context, rather than being imported and imposed on teachers. The key questions I sought to find answers to were:

- 1 What do teachers think are good and appropriate teaching practices within their working context, given the many difficulties?
- 2 How do learners see the practice of their teachers? What type of teaching do they see as 'good'?

Six teachers and 60 students from six classrooms (three from each of the two contexts) were selected through a series of processes for the first phase of the study. A seventh teacher was

added following strong recommendations from the children in one school who felt that the teacher I had initially selected following recommendations from head teachers and other teachers was not their favourite teacher. Over a period of five months I collected data in the form of pre-observation interviews with teachers, classroom observations, videos of lessons, child-group participatory interviews (see Kuchah and Pinter 2012) and stimulated recall interviews with individual teachers based on videos of lessons they themselves had selected as their most successful of the recorded lessons.

After a preliminary analysis of the data collected in phase one of the study, I organised two-day focus group workshops with separate groups of 15 teachers (30 in total) from each of the two contexts. During the workshops, workshop participants watched each of the seven lessons selected by the teachers in phase one, commented on the positive aspects of each lesson and reflected on appropriate practices and principles emanating from these lessons. They were also encouraged to share stories of their own successful practices as a basis for further reflection on appropriate pedagogy. Workshop participants defined appropriate pedagogy as a combination of three main factors: that a particular aspect/instance of practice was good, that it was do-able and that it was worth doing in the context of their own classrooms. Workshop discussions were then further analysed alongside the different perspectives of participants in phase one of the study. The findings revealed a significant convergence, but also divergence, of views between teachers and students about what constituted good and appropriate practice. Areas of divergence between teachers' and students' perspectives formed the basis for further reflection enabling workshop participants to generate more ideas and insights about learners and learning that they found useful in adjusting their initial ideas about appropriate teaching. As one workshop participant noted,

From Harry's report of what children said concerning group work, I really agree with them, that is, the children. [...] I think it is wrong for us to presume that the children are not able to work in groups; we have seen a good example of how well they can develop very good ideas and even good English when they work together. That class is even bigger than most of our classes so I don't think we have any excuse for not doing group work.

Clearly, it was teachers' and students' views, rather than Ministry of Education policy requirements, that had the biggest impact on teachers' practices. The opportunity, provided by the data collection workshop, for teachers to reflect on the positives of the lessons of their peers as well as on the perspectives of learners and to share their own stories of success facilitated the generation and dissemination of good practice amongst workshop participants.

Although this was not the primary purpose of the workshop, the fact that I remained non-judgmental throughout the discussions (an attitude that teachers were not used seeing from ‘experts’ and their inspectors) provided an enabling environment for new ideas to be learned as evidenced from the following excerpt from a workshop participant:

... the facilitator, though a national inspector, brought down himself to a primary school teacher that I am; he was indeed like an inexperienced primary school teacher learning from us. This made my own learning very simple and interesting.

From my research to collective research: TA-research within CAMELTA

The experience and insights gained from the research workshop described above contributed to an exploration with my PhD supervisor, Richard Smith, of ways in which contextually appropriate practice could be more systematically generated and shared with other teachers around Cameroon. Together we have developed the idea of teacher association (TA) research—that is, ‘systematic inquiry which is based on [TA] members’ priorities and officially endorsed by a TA and which engages members as active participants in what they see as a collective project’ (Smith and Kuchah forthcoming). The project started in August 2013 following a plenary by Richard at the 12th annual conference of CAMELTA during which 170 CAMELTA members wrote down research questions which they would like to investigate if they had a chance to do so (see Smith and Kuchah 2014). These questions were collated and categorised by the Research Committee of CAMELTA into 14 research priority areas.

Together with Research Committee members, we designed an initial open-ended questionnaire with the aim of collecting relatively extensive narratives of successful ELT practices. The questionnaire consisted of three main questions as follows:

- 1 Please tell the story of a recent successful experience in your teaching. What was successful and what made it successful, do you think?
- 2 What are the major problems you face in your teaching situation? What is problematic and why?
- 3 Please describe anything you have done to address (some of) the problems in (2) above. Was this successful? Why/Why not?

Between October 2013 and February 2014, a total of 504 questionnaire responses were collected from CAMELTA members during regional workshops in different parts of the country. The full list of research questions collected in 2013 and questionnaire responses have been uploaded to the CAMELTA website and more research-capable members of the

association are being encouraged to use these as starting points for their research. It is hoped that future research findings based, at least in part, on this data will be shared more systematically with the wider membership during national and regional conferences in the future. Already, respondent feedback on the questionnaire shows that it has had a positive impact on their professional development and agency, as can be seen from the following two excerpts:

- It has helped me explain the difficulties I face in my work and to reflect on my responses to these difficulties. This will help me improve my teaching and thus help my students.
- I really feel proud to be part of this initiative by our association. I wish we had more time to respond to this questionnaire because it is meant to address issues with our own teaching as identified by us, rather than dealing with issues that are not part of our own experience.

Final reflections

The rapid spread and importance of the English language, as well as the ever increasing number of children in state schools and classrooms especially in developing world countries today is imposing new challenges which need to be addressed. The ideal classrooms of 30 or fewer pupils, sitting at individual desks and taught by native speaker teachers in air-conditioned rooms are no more the norm but the exception in today's ELT world. Pedagogic innovations 'donated' to developing countries even by well-meaning organisations and imposed by policy makers on teachers already struggling with the kinds of difficulties I have presented here need to be more closely aligned with bottom-up practices and initiatives by teachers and TAs at grassroots level. Teachers continue to be the interface between policy requirements and actual learning and their role and agency needs to be more explicitly acknowledged, valued and incorporated into the policy enactment process. There is evidence that top-down policy very often leads to 'tissue rejection' (Holliday 1992) by practitioners and the research findings I have presented elsewhere (Kuchah 2013) and here confirm previous suggestions that

... teachers are more likely to accept pedagogic innovation when it is seen to emanate from, or be endorsed by, their peers [and students]. This is because teachers are too used to being blamed for the failure of pedagogic policies when such policies are enacted and handed down by different official bodies with little or no consideration for those who are called upon to implement them in the classroom (Kao, Grima and Kuchah 2013: 21).

My own experiences as a teacher, teacher trainer, policy maker and developing researcher have informed me of the potential benefits of developing systematic procedures for generating, reflecting on, and sharing contextually appropriate pedagogic principles and practices. More specifically, the first steps of the CAMELTA research project (see also Smith and Kuchah, forthcoming) suggest that language education in ‘difficult’ circumstances can benefit from research and policy priorities and processes that are determined by, or at least co-constructed with teachers. Innovation needs to be informed by, rather than to inform, teachers and learners agency and for this to happen, research and policy enactment may need to be more bottom-up, context driven and where possible, supported by TAs.

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